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Journey to 'The Crucible'

By ARTHUR MILLER

The Crucible" is taken from history. No character is in the play who did not take a similar role in Salem, 1692. The basic story is recorded, if briefly, in certain documents of the time. It will be a long time before I shall be able to shake Rebecca Nurse, John Proctor, Giles Corey and the others out of my mind. But there are strange, even weird memories that have connected themselves to this play, and these have to do with the present, and it has all got mixed up together.

I went to Salem for the first time early last spring. I already knew the story, and had thought about it for a long time. I had never been to Salem before and, driving alone up the brand new superhighway, I felt a shock at seeing the perfectly ordinary steel sign reading, "Salem 3 mi." I confess it - some part of my mind had expected to see the old wooden village, not the railroad tracks, the factories, the trucks. These things were not real, suddenly, but intruders, as tourists are in the halls of Versailles. Underneath, in the earth, was the reality. I drove into the town.

I asked the courthouse clerk for the town records for 1692. A lawyer-looking man in an overcoat asked for 1941. A lady, who looked like she were planning to sue somebody, asked for 1913. The clerk handed over a volume to each of us and we sat at separate tables, the three of us, turning pages.

The lawyer began copying - possibly from a deed. The woman read perhaps a will - and got angrier. I looked into 1692. Here were wills, too, and deeds, and warrants sworn out, and the usual debris a town leaves behind it for the legal record.

And then ... dialogue! Prosecutor Hathorne is examining Rebecca Nurse. The court is full of people weeping or the young girls who sit before them strangling because Rebecca's spirit is out tormenting them. And Hathorne says, "It is awful to see your eye dry when so many are wet." And Rebecca replies, "You do not know my heart. I never afflicted no child, never in my life. I am as clear as the child unborn."

They hanged her. She was in her seventies. They had hesitated to go and arrest her because of her high reputation; but they took her from her sickbed, they took her from her lovely house that stands in the countryside yet, and they hanged her by the neck over the long Salem Bay.

The lawyer in the overcoat was copying his deed; the lady was back at the counter, asking the clerk for 1912. Did they know what happened here?

In the museum all is silent. An old man, looking like a retired professor, is reading a document. Two middle-aged couples come in from their automobile outside and ask to see the pins: The pins the spirits stuck the children with. The pins are in the courthouse, they are told. They look about at the books, the faded fragments of paper that once meant Proctor must hang tomorrow, paper that came through the farmhouse door in the hand of a friend who had a half-determined, half-ashamed look in his eyes.

The tourists pass the books, the exhibits and no hint of danger reaches them from the quaint relics. I have a desire to tell them the significance of those relics. It is the desire to write.

Day after day in the courthouse, until the evenings begin to arrive with foreboding in the night breeze. The locations of the old farmhouses are in my mind, their directions from the spot on which I stand; on Essex Street was a house, perhaps a few yards from here, where Reverend Parris lived and at night discussed with certain others who in the town was acting suspiciously, who might have shown signs of the Devil's touch. Salem was taken from the Hebrew, Shalom, meaning peace, but now in my mind and in the streets it is a dark word.

The stroll down Essex Street I remember, and the empty spaces between the parking meters, the dark storefronts - but further down a lighted store, and noise. I take a look. A candy store. A mob of girls and boys in their teens running in and out, ganging around on the vacant street; a jalopy pulls up with two wet-haired boys, and a whispered consultation with a girl on the running board; she runs into the store, comes out with a friend, and off they go into the night, the proud raccoon tail straightening from the radiator cap. And suddenly, from around a corner, two girls hopping with a broomstick between their legs, and a general laughter going up at the special joke. A broomstick. And riding it. And I remember the girls of Salem, the only Salem there ever was for me - the 1692 Salem - and how they purged their sins by embracing God and pointing out His enemies in the town.

And a feeling of love at seeing Rebecca Nurse's house on its gentle knoll; the house she lay in, ill, when they came, shuffling their feet, ashamed to ask her to come to court because the children said she had sent her spirit out.

And the great rock, standing mum over the Bay, the splintered precipice on which the gibbet was built. The highway traffic endlessly, mindlessly humming at its foot, but up here the barrenness, the clinkers of broken stones, and the vast view of the bay; here hung Rebecca, John Proctor, George Jacobs - people more real to me than the living can ever be. The sense of a terrible marvel again; that people could have such a belief in themselves and in the rightness of their consciences as to give their lives rather than say what they thought was false. Or, perhaps, they only feared Hell so much? Yet, Rebecca said, and it is written in the record, "I cannot belie myself." And she knew who they were.

My friends return, the men of my own life - in the hotel taproom a circle of salesmen sitting around, waiting for bedtime. I listen. They are comparing the sizes of their television screens. Which one is the big-earner? Yep, that one. He says less, but they listen more when he says it. They are all wishing they were him. And all a little lost in the eyes, and nice fellas, so damned eager, and men-among-men, and around the eyes ever so faintly lost; laughing a little more than they want to, listening longer than they want to, sorry without sorrow, laughing with less than joy, until up in the hotel room alone there is only one certainty - tomorrow will come. Another day, another chance to find out - who they are. How they got there. Where they're going.

The rock stands forever in Salem. They knew who they were. Nineteen.